Loyalism In Western Virginia During The American Revolution

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In 1775, approximately 30,000 people of Caucasian ancestry made their home in what is now West Virginia. Augusta and Botetourt Counties extended across western Virginia from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Ohio River. The other units of government were Berkeley and Hampshire Counties and the district of West Augusta. In 1776, the district of West Augusta was divided into Monongalia, Ohio, and Yohogania Counties. Due to the westward extension of the Mason Dixon line, however, most of Yohogania County fell under the jurisdiction of Pennsylvania; the remaining territory was added to Ohio County.[1]

Virginia further modified the boundaries of her counties in 1776 by abolishing old Fincastle County and creating three new counties—Kentucky, Washington, and Montgomery. Greenbrier County secured its birthright in 1777 when it was carved from the western part of Botetourt County and extended to the Ohio.[2]

In 1774, Dunmore's War culminated in the decisive victory by Colonel Andrew Lewis over the Indians at the Battle of Point Pleasant. This affair has often been referred to as the first battle of the American Revolution. This is an overstatement, but it was clearly an American victory.[3] There were no regular troops or officers in the campaign, and the initiative was unquestionably colonial. Lord Dunmore in 1774 achieved here the height of his popularity, due to the effective measures taken against the savages. That Dunmore foresaw the possibility of open conflict between the Crown and the Colonies is

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[1] Virgil A. Lewis, *Third Biennial Report of the Department of Archives and History of the State of West Virginia* (Charleston, 1911), 39. See E. B. Greene and V. D. Harrington, *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (Columbia University Press, 1932), 152-153. This source reports only 11,600 free white persons living in Berkeley, Greenbrier, Monongalia, and Hampshire Counties in 1782. Population figures for Ohio County were not listed. Exact population figures cannot be ascertained. See also F. Douglas Halverson, "County Histories of the United States" (Unpublished thesis, Salt Lake City, 1941), 63.

[2] Lewis, *Third Biennial Report*, 39.

[3] R. G. Thwaites and L. P. Kellogg, (eds.), *Documentary History of Dunmore's War* (Wisconsin Historical Society Publications, Madison, 1905), xxv.

a reasonable assumption. It is equally true that Dunmore tried to strengthen Loyalist sentiment in the West, exemplified by his appointment of Dr. John Connolly to manage Virginia's affairs about Fort Pitt. It was not, however, until 1775 at Lexington and Concord that the first open clashes between American patriots and British regulars occurred.

The results of the Battle of Point Pleasant, however, did play a significant role, not only in the defense of the frontier, but also in the ultimate success of the colonists in their struggle for independence against George III. Temporarily it broke the savages' power and made it possible to secure the frontier against future Indian depredations. Not only was the frontier maintained, but it was also extended into Kentucky. This victory necessarily prevented British agents from being as successful as they might well have been in inciting Indians against the settlements. Furthermore, it released many frontier patriots to join the Continental Army. Primarily, the frontier's contribution to independence was defensive, but had the combined efforts of the British, Indians, and Loyalists been successful in dislodging the frontiersmen, the success of the Revolution would have been impaired, if not lost entirely.[4] The successful defense of the frontier as a contribution to independence is manifested in the George Rogers Clark expedition. Had Clark been unable to use Kentucky as a base of operations, the capture of Vincennes and Kaskaskia would have been impossible.[5]

In 1775, the frontiersmen of western Virginia received the news of the rebellion against George III with enthusiasm. The first troops from south of the Potomac came from the counties beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.[6] Western Virginians answered nine other calls for troops and were noted for their patriotism, enthusiasm, and ability to fight. Numerous native sons served the Revolutionary cause with distinction and in positions of leadership. Western Virginia not only

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[4] Charles H. Ambler, *West Virginia, The Mountain State* (New York, 1940), 108, 114.

[5] The George Rogers Clark expedition was financed by Virginia, and most of the men who made the trek into the Illinois country with Clark came from the western counties of Virginia; one hundred seventy-nine officers and men were of western Virginia extraction. See *ibid.*, 133.

[6] *Ibid.*, 134. See also Virgil A. Lewis, *First Biennial Report of the Department of Archives and History of the State of West Virginia* (Charleston, 1906), 4.

supplied manpower, but also made contributions of clothing, food, wagons, and other articles necessary for the perpetuation of war.[7]

Loyalism in 1775-1776 was practically nonexistent in the West. Only at Fort Pitt were there any outward signs of disaffection. Loyalist sentiment may have existed elsewhere, but it was not until 1777, with the patriot cause showing little sign of success, that the western country began to show the effects of doubt and discouragement, stirring the Loyalist element into acts of defiance and violence.

Disaffection to the American cause was not the result of loyalty to the British crown, although there were individuals sincere in their loyalty to king and country. The fact that the patriot cause was faring badly, coupled with Hamilton's proclamations, created many waverers. British agents who traveled the back country of Virginia and Pennsylvania found many timid but willing subscribers.[8] Many were lured by promises of land and other material considerations.[9] Finally, discontent smouldered and burst into flame due to the burden of heavy taxation and the unwillingness to serve in a military capacity.

Another group of individualistic frontiersmen swore allegiance to no one. The blood of fallen comrades at Concord and the din of battle at Bunker Hill were not clearly perceivable to them. Virginia was the scene of invasion and much destruction; but to these individuals whose primary concern was the Indian menace, war beyond the Blue Ridge left but little impression. This element of indifference in the population can by no means be classified as Loyalism. As the successful defense of the frontier was a major contribution toward independence, this group of individualists contributed to the patriot cause.

Loyalism existed in three areas of western Virginia: in

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[7] Ambler, *West Virginia*, 114-117.

[8] Hamilton J. Eckenrode, *The Revolution in Virginia* (New York, 1916), 232.

[9] See Hamilton's Proclamation in R. G. Thwaites and L. P. Kellogg, (eds.), *Frontier Defense on the Upper Ohio, 1777-1778*, (Wisconsin Historical Society publications, Madison, 1908), 14.

and around Fort Pitt,[10] in the extreme northwest, and to a lesser extent in Monongalia and Hampshire Counties. Disaffection was never predominant. Only at Fort Pitt was there any real threat for Loyalist ascendancy. Loyalist plots and conspiracies were effectively suppressed, often with very damaging results to the Tories. Only one plot succeeded during the entire period between 1775-1783. This conspiracy resulted in the escape of a few Tories from Fort Pitt. Significance is attached to this plot, but it did little to impair the outcome of the frontier struggle.[11]

It is significant to note that no social or religious differences divided the Loyalists and the patriots in western Virginia. From all classes and all sects, a sprinkling of Loyalists appeared. The Loyalists could not have been very large and were never well organized into an effective movement. Dunmore reported to Lord Dartmouth in February, 1777, that he knew only of twelve persons in the back country who were loyal, and eight of these were at Fort Pitt.[12]

The first evidence of Loyalist activity in western Virginia is found in and around Fort Pitt. In 1774, Dr. John Connolly, Lord Dunmore's agent, went to Fort Pitt to take charge of Virginia's interests. Of greater importance to the royal government was the Loyalist sentiment Connolly probably kept alive about Fort Pitt.[13]

In 1775, Connolly conceived a bold plan. Fully endorsed by Lord Dunmore, Connolly was to proceed to Fort Detroit and raise as many Indians and partisans as he could. He was to be joined by Captain Lord, commander of two companies of Royal Irish. Combining their forces, they were to march to Alexandria, Virginia. Dunmore was to gather Loyalist forces in the east and join Connolly and Lord on the Potomac. To

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[10] A Loyalist conspiracy was suppressed by Colonel Alexander Campbe... around the lead mines of Montgomery County in the southwest. This conspiracy, however, is not included within the ... of this paper. Fort Pitt has been included, as it was in the possess... Virginia during the Revolutionary period. The conspiracies taking ... in this area had direct bearing upon the inhabitants who lived in ...ent-day West Virginia. Fort Pitt was claimed by Pennsylvania as a par... f Westmoreland County and in 1784 it was incorporated into Pennsylvani... as the result of a compromise with Virginia, extending its boundary. ...or details of the boundary dispute, see Ambler, *West Virginia*, 97-103; Thomas P. Abernethy, *Western Lands and the American Revolution* (New York, 1937), 5-8, 91-96.

[11] Details of this conspiracy are found on page 270 of this article.

[12] Isaac S. Harrell, *Loyalists in Virginia* (Durham, 1926), 52, 65.

[13] *Ibid.*, 98.

strengthen his plan, Dr. Connolly traveled to Boston to secure from General Gage additional troops and supplies for Dunmore's forces in the east. Upon his return from Boston with favorable news, Connolly was commissioned as a lieutenant colonel. In the autumn of 1776, Connolly and three confederates left for Detroit to execute his plan. Connolly and his companions were captured, however, in Frederick County, Maryland, and were imprisoned. Lord Dunmore was never to be successful. He conducted a campaign of pillage and plunder in eastern Virginia, was defeated, and fled to England.[14]

According to Harrell, however, Connolly was to raise a band of partisans about Fort Pitt and Alexander McKee, an Indian trader, was to raise a regiment of Indians around Detroit. After the downfall of Dunmore and Connolly, McKee supposedly went to Detroit, became interested in land speculation, and the Connolly plot ended.[15]

The flame of Loyalism burned brightly around Fort Pitt in 1776. Had Connolly succeeded, serious consequences might have developed in this area. In June, John Nevill, in command of the Virginia forces garrisoning Fort Pitt, wrote the Committee of Safety that some of the leading men in this area were suspected of disaffection. He further stated that a petition, addressed to Congress, was being passed around requesting to have the territory west of the Alleghenies set up as an independent government.[16] This petition was suppressed for the time being, but how soon it would revive was uncertain.

General Edward Hand was appointed by Congress on April 9, 1777, to take command of Fort Pitt. He assumed his duties on June 1, 1777. Due to the failure of his first offensive against the Indians in the winter of 1777-1778 (known in history as

[14] R. G. Thwaites and L. P. Kellogg, (eds.), *Revolution on the Upper Ohio, 1775-1777* (Wisconsin Historical Society Publications, Madison, 1908), 136-142.

[15] Harrell, *Loyalism*, [illegible]. In Thwaites and Kellogg, *Revolution on Upper Ohio*, 136-142, no mention of McKee was found. Furthermore, Harrell relates that in 1776, Fort Pitt was in danger of an attack by McKee and his Indians. Upon careful examination of his reference, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XVI (1908), 53-54, no mention of an expected attack by McKee was found. It appears, therefore, that McKee was not involved in the Connolly plot. McKee's successful execution of a Loyalist conspiracy at Fort Pitt in 1778 would seem to substantiate such a conclusion.

[16] Nevill to the President of the Committee of Safety, June 13, 1776, in *Virginia Magazine*, XVI (1908), 54-55.

the Squaw Campaign), Hand planned another penetration into Indian territory for the spring of 1778. He was convinced that nothing else would prove effectual in subduing the tribesmen. Success seemed wholly probable, but among the men surrounding the general was Colonel Alexander McKee, a former Indian agent long suspected of Loyalist tendencies. He was necessarily well informed of Hand's strategy. On the night of March 28, McKee broke the parole he had given, and escaped to the Indian towns on his way to serve under the British flag in Detroit.[17]

In May, 1778, Hand wrote Major Horatio Gates that he had suppressed a conspiracy—an unsuccessful attempt at desertion. Two of the Tory band, William Bentley and Thomas Hendricks, were executed. Hand expressed the fear that if he didn't receive reinforcements and quell the Tory threat, the region would have to be abandoned or overrun in a short time.[18]

Due to the escape of McKee, however, Hand found his position intolerable and was succeeded by General Lachlan McIntosh. Had Hand checked McKee and Girty, Indian raids would have been fewer and his offensive successful.[19] Nevertheless, his command at Fort Pitt is memorable in the annals of the Revolution. At a critical period, Hand saved the frontier from being pushed back upon the colonies. His watchful care, his aid to western expeditions, and successful maintenance of local garrisons marked his administration as one of efficiency and vigor.

No further evidence of Loyalist activity is found until "late in 1780 the Loyalists around Fort Pitt attempted to establish communication with Detroit and induce another desertion similar to that of 1778."[20] In a letter to Richard Peters in December 1780, Colonel Daniel Brodhead, now in command of Fort Pitt, related, "I learn more and more of the disaffection

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[17] Thwaites and Kellogg, *Frontier Defense*, xv-xvi.

[18] General Hand to Horatio Gates, May 14, 1778; in Louise P. Kellogg, *Frontier Advance on the Upper Ohio, 1778-1779* (Wisconsin Historical Society Publications, Madison, 1916), 49-51.

[19] McKee was accompanied by Simon Girty and Matthew Eliot, two noted Tories who led Indian raids against the frontier. Girty was in command of the Indian forces at the Battle of Fort Henry in 1777. See James M. Callahan, *West Virginia, Old and New* (New York, 1923), I, 86.

[20] Louise P. Kellogg, *Frontier Retreat on the Upper Ohio, 1779-1781* (Wisconsin Historical Society Publications, Madison, 1917), 33.

of many of the inhabitants on this side the mountain. The King of Britain's health is often drunk in companies; & I believe those who wish to see the Regular Troops removed from this department, & a favorable opportunity to submit to British Government."[21] Brodhead, however, more wary than General Hand, arrested the British agents, recaptured the few who succeeded in escaping, and put down what might have led to a formidable Loyalist uprising.[22]

The last indications of Loyalist activities around Fort Pitt were found in an exchange of letters between Brodhead and General George Washington in the spring of 1781. Brodhead reported the capture of a Tory whose incarceration had been made possible by the discovery of a letter in a powder horn. He expressed the belief that due to the sympathies of some of the garrison, he would escape before he met the reward he deserved. In closing Brodhead said, "Indeed this place is infested with such a set of disaffected inhabitants that I have been under the necessity of ordering some away, and others must soon follow to prevent greater injury to the service."[23]

General Washington had uncovered information indicating that Colonel John Connolly was to collect refugees in New York and proceed to Canada, join Sir John Johnson, and undertake an invasion of the frontier, including an attack of Fort Pitt. Washington advised Brodhead to remove any suspected or disaffected persons immediately to prevent collusion in the advent of an attack.[24]

There was little Tory sentiment in Monongalia County. In the autumn of 1777, however, a Tory plot was brewing. Colonel Zackwell Morgan, in a letter to General Hand, stated that he had captured a number of Tories who confessed that their rulers and leaders were some of the leading men at Fort Pitt. Morgan warned Hand of the possibility of a combined English and Indian attack against Fort Pitt the next spring [1778]

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[21] Daniel Brodhead to Richard Peters, December 7, 1780; in *ibid.*, 23.
[22] *Ibid.*, 23.
[23] Daniel Brodhead to George Washington, March 27, 1781; in *ibid.*, 352-353.
[24] Washington to Brodhead, April 20, 1781; in *ibid.*, 389. Connolly was held prisoner until 1781 when he escaped to Canada. In 1782, he led an attacking force which destroyed Hannastown, near Fort Pitt. For a character sketch of Connolly see Thwaites and Kellogg, *Dunmore's War*, 42n.

with the Tories attempting to make possible the capture of the fort.[25]

Colonel Thomas Gaddis, of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, warned Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Brown, at Red Stone Old Fort on the Monongahela, of the impending danger. Red Stone Old Fort was the powder magazine that supplied all of the Virginia counties west of the Alleghanies. Brown increased the guard on the powder magazine and Gaddis, with one hundred men, went in pursuit of the Loyalists.[26]

This conspiracy was short lived when a skirmish was held and the Loyalists dispersed. A Tory named Higginson or Hickson seems to have been the only one killed, having been drowned while crossing the Cheat River on a flatboat with Colonel Morgan and four others. His death was claimed to be accidental, but Colonel Morgan was charged with murder. At his trial, however, Morgan was cleared of all charges.[27]

The last scene of Tory conspiracy in western Virginia was east of the Alleghanies in the region now included in Hardy, Grant, and Pendleton Counties, but in 1781 this area was part of Hampshire County. The center of the plot was near the site of Petersburg in present-day Grant County.[28]

Colonel Van Meter in a letter to Governor Jefferson stated:

> . . . I am sorry to inform your Excellency that a dangerous insurrection has lately arrisen [sic] in this County, occasioned by the execution of the late acts of assembly, for Recruiting this States Quota of Troops to serve in the Continental Army, and the act for supplying the army with Clothes, Provisions, and Waggons . . . and although every measure that prudence could suggest has been taken to suppress the Rioters, yet it has proved ineffectual by reason of their having a superior force. . . .[29]

Further relating the situation in Hampshire County, Van Meter stated:

> . . . a certain John Claypole said if all the men were of his mind they would not make up any Cloathes, Beef or men and all that would Join him should turn out. Upon which he Got all the men

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[25] Rockwell Morgan to General Hand, August 29, 1777; in Thwaites and Kellogg, *Frontier Defense*, 52-53.
[26] Callahan, *West Virginia*, 84-85.
[27] Thwaites and Kellogg, *Frontier Defense*, 143n.
[28] Callahan, *West Virginia*, 85-86.
[29] Garrett Van Meter to Thomas Jefferson, April 11, 1781; in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton University Press, 1952), V, 605-611.

present to five or six and Got Liquor and Drank king George the thirds health, and Damnation to Congress.[30]

Van Meter set out from Oldsfields with thirty militiamen to enforce the payment of taxes, but was encountered by fifty armed Loyalists assembled at the house of a German called John Brake. Due to their numerical superiority, Van Meter withdrew after failing in an effort to reason with them. The Tories became more defiant than ever when they organized a company of men, elected Claypole captain, and made plans to join the British as soon as the opportunity should present itself. Their self-confidence and defiance inevitably resulted in ruin.[31]

General Daniel Morgan, of Continental Army fame, learned of their organization while at home in Frederick County. Morgan said he feared much less a superior number of British troops than to see the laws trampled upon with impunity.[32] Collecting four hundred militia, Morgan marched against the Tories and without attempting a parley completely conquered them.[33]

In addition to capturing the leaders, Morgan's army also caught a man named John Payne, "and branded him on the posteriors with a red hot spade telling him they would make him a freemason."[34] General Morgan also visited the premises of John Brake, whose fine farm had served as a rendezvous for the Tory band who had feasted on the best he had. Knowing all this, Morgan remained two days and two nights in the company of his reluctant host. "As Brake had entertained and feasted the Tories, Morgan concluded he should feast them in return,"[35] Morgan's army then returned to Winchester and disbanded. Many of these Tories, in order to make amends, joined the American Army and fought until the end of the war.

No further evidence of Loyalism was found in western Virginia after Daniel Morgan crushed the insurrection in Hamp-

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[30] Van Meter to *Jefferson*, April 14, 1781; in Boyd, *Jefferson Papers*, V, 455.
[31] Callahan, *West Virginia*, 96.
[32] Daniel Morgan to *Jefferson*, March 23, 1781; in Boyd, *Jefferson Papers*, V, 218-219.
[33] Callahan, *West Virginia*, 96.
[34] Samuel Kercheval, *A History of the Valley of Virginia* (Strasburg, Virginia, 1925), 144.
[35] *Ibid.*, 145-146.

shire County, in the spring of 1781. It is possible that the effective measures taken by western officials in combating the Tory menace discouraged new acts of defiance and violence. The fact that American arms were on the verge of success would also indicate reluctance on the part of Loyalists to manifest their sentiments in the form of insurrection and rebellion. In Fort Pitt, the hotbed of Loyalist conspiracy in the western counties, Tory plots were no longer in evidence.

Although disaffection caused great concern and created confusion in the back country of Virginia, attempts to foment major uprisings failed. The lack of organization and leadership, and in some instances, the absence of local support inevitably led to the downfall of formidable Loyalist opposition. Loyalism, in the final analysis, did little to impair the outcome of the frontier struggle or the success of the American Revolution.